

The Lawless One and the Great Apostasy

By Paul R. Blake

A fellow evangelist asked recently: *“Can you help explain 2Thessalonians 2:1-12 to me? Specifically, what is the ‘falling away’ and who is the ‘man of sin, the son of perdition’? Is it specific or general to all false teachers?”*

The context of 2Thessalonians addresses an apparent error at Thessalonica regarding the return of the Lord. Somehow they had the impression that Jesus was coming back in the immediate future. According to church historians and commentators, they were essentially getting rid of all of their possessions, donning white robes, and sitting around on hilltops waiting for Jesus (hyperbole, but not too far from the truth). In addition, first century Christians also dealt with some of the same confusion common to contemporary "Christianity," that is, failing to discern between the second coming of the Lord in Judgment and the coming of the Lord in punishment of Jerusalem and Rome in the first century. Paul must clear up their misunderstanding and encourage them to go through life in a normal pattern while at the same time living in anticipation of the Lord's return.

Verses 1-3a addresses the error that has been taught there regarding the second coming, including the error that the Lord had already come and they missed it. Verses 3b-5 is Paul's reminder of what he taught while he was with them. That is, the second coming of the Lord will be preceded by an extended and nearly universal apostasy, which obviously had not yet occurred. Verses 6-9 considers, in apocalyptic or prophetic language laden with figurative speech, the advent of leaders of the apostasy, who, just like all false teachers in history, are the servants of the Adversary.

Verses 10-12 are texts relevant to any time, apocalyptic or otherwise. Ten talks of the effects of the deceptive teaching of the lawless one. However, this must be remembered... one cannot be deceived without his permission. We tend to put all of the blame on others when we are tricked; we blame the lying politician rather than the gullible voters who elected him; we sympathize with folks who have been victims of scams. BUT, the fact that cannot be escaped is that we will not be deceived if we choose not to be. If we do not want to believe the political promises, we will not be fooled by them. If we do not entertain thoughts of greed, we will not be fooled by scam artists. Regardless of how clever deceivers may be, we bear the responsibility for the consequences of having been deceived. It is the will of God that this be so, in spite of whether or not we think this is fair.

Thorough knowledge of the truth is the best defense against error. If I know the truth and love the truth, it will protect me on two fronts: 1) I will be able to discern error by measuring it against truth, and 2) I will not be tempted by interest or desire for new things offered by error since I love the truth and don't want anything more than truth.

Paul writes that those who do not receive the truth or who do not love the truth leave themselves open and vulnerable to error and deception. If I do not love truth, I will be attracted to error. If I do not know truth, I will be deceived by error. It is axiomatic.

As for God sending them strong delusion, we know that scripture does not contradict scripture. Therefore if we come across a text that seems to say that God is tempting or deceiving people contrary to James 1:12-15, then we are mistaken in our understanding that 2Thessalonians 2:10-12 implies that God tempts and deceives men. We must draw another conclusion that does not contradict James 1:12-15.

The answer is found in God's design of our nature. We were created to believe in something. God revealed Himself in every dispensation and told men to believe in Him and follow His will. At the same time, God also created us with the power to choose to believe in Him or not. However, one choice we do not have is to believe in nothing. Man will always believe in something, if not God, then in themselves or an idol or a philosophy et al. So since the men

addressed in 2Thessalonians 2:10-12 do not love the truth and do not believe in God, then by God's design of man's nature, those men will choose to follow a strong delusion that God also allows to exist as a consequence of giving man free will. God does not force men to choose a strong delusion; but rather, because God created man in such a way that he must believe something, when man rejects the truth, he must accept the lie.

With regard to your specific questions, these are matters over which both brethren and denominationalists have speculated endlessly and fruitlessly over the years. I do not understand why so many men are indifferent and casual about clearly revealed matters, but become adamant and passionate over matters that are only partially revealed. Nevertheless, it is up to you and me to teach brethren not to hunt for mystery where it does not exist nor to insert fashionable doctrines because in their misguided opinion, they think it fits.

Most men want this passage to refer to a specific falling away and to a specific man of sin. They do so because they believe that knowing the who and when of the great apostasy will enable them to discover a schedule for the end of the world. That's not going to happen. Only God knows when the end will be, and He is not telling nor is He giving broad hints (Matt. 24:36). He wants men in every generation to live as if Judgment is just around the corner.

Therefore, Paul is writing about apostasy and apostates in general terms. During the time of the spread of the gospel, matters were in the development phase. Issues relative to the gospel would not have existed until the gospel began to be preached and spread throughout the world. Now that the gospel is moving around the world, opposition to begins to grow and spread. While there was error and false teachers and apostasy from the beginning, it was limited and often localized to individuals. Widespread, organized, and focused false teaching and apostasy had not yet happened. Paul tells them that the second coming of the Lord will not happen until after there is a widespread apostasy.

The lawless one is not a single individual. If it was one person, it would be critical for them to know who he was. Paul gave zero specifics about this man. Instead, he was telling them that whenever and where ever wholesale opposition to the gospel begins, the leadership of that movement will always expose himself as a servant of the Adversary. Just as Paul's warning is against large scale apostasy in general, so is the lawless one a term given to describe the leadership of any large scale opposition to truth. That is, everyone who brings error and leads a movement against Christ will inevitably expose his affiliation to the Adversary who is behind every error.

And as with everyone who opposes God, so will be the fate of all of the lawless ones and their followers done through the centuries. They will be exposed and punished by God. It has been speculated by brethren that the pope and the Catholic Church are the lawless one and great apostasy. I am convinced that they are only one of many manifestations of the lawless one and great apostasy.

In Paul's day there was no worldwide apostasy and no real centralized leadership. He told the Thessalonians that Judgment would not come until this came to pass. Now that there have been several lawless ones and great apostasies, we can expect the second coming of the Lord at any time. I know this does not satisfy our brethren who look and long for gnostic mystery in the scriptures, but you and I must stand for the simple, unadorned truth.